

**Rev. Dr. Karen Blanchard**  
**“The Beinning of the End or the End of the Beginning”**  
**First Presbyterian Church of Kirkwood**  
**Sunday, April 4, 2019**

**Psalm 24**

*Of David. A Psalm.*

*The earth is the Lord's and all that is in it,  
the world, and those who live in it;  
for he has founded it on the seas,  
and established it on the rivers.*

*Who shall ascend the hill of the Lord?  
And who shall stand in his holy place?  
Those who have clean hands and pure hearts,  
who do not lift up their souls to what is false,  
and do not swear deceitfully.  
They will receive blessing from the Lord,  
and vindication from the God of their salvation.  
Such is the company of those who seek him,  
who seek the face of the God of Jacob.  
Selah*

*Lift up your heads, O gates!  
and be lifted up, O ancient doors!  
that the King of glory may come in.*

*Who is the King of glory?  
The Lord, strong and mighty,  
the Lord, mighty in battle.*

*Lift up your heads, O gates!  
and be lifted up, O ancient doors!  
that the King of glory may come in.*

*Who is this King of glory?  
The Lord of hosts,  
he is the King of glory.  
Selah*

**John 12:12-16**

*The next day the great crowd that had come to the festival heard that Jesus was coming to Jerusalem. So they took branches of palm trees and went out to meet him, shouting,*

*'Hosanna!*

*Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord—  
the King of Israel!'*

*Jesus found a young donkey and sat on it; as it is written:*

*'Do not be afraid, daughter of Zion.*

*Look, your king is coming,  
sitting on a donkey's colt!'*

*His disciples did not understand these things at first; but when Jesus was glorified, then they remembered that these things had been written of him and had been done to him.*

Will you pray with me? Gracious God, we come to the close of the journey of Lent, but we make one more journey to Jerusalem. Be with us now, as we reflect on the meaning, the power, and the challenge of your Word, and of the events this week. Amen.

I often find that it feels different, preaching on Palm Sunday. Because those who gathered to cheer and welcome Jesus as he came riding into Jerusalem, don't know what's going to happen in the week that unfolds. But we, on this side of the story, do know. We know because we are told of what happened in the rest of the gospels and with Paul. The return to Jerusalem is clearly important because all four gospels talk about Palm Sunday, or the Palm Sunday event, each slightly different. And this morning, though, I was struck by the fact that John wants us to consider-- or the writer of the gospel wants us to consider that perhaps the disciples, like the crowd, do not really know what's coming. He writes, "His disciples did not understand these things at first. But when Jesus was glorified, then, they remembered what had been written of Him." So we read, on that day, that crowds went out of the gates of the city to greet Jesus, and as Teddy said, laid down their coats and cloaks and put out branches. And that was the tradition for welcoming royalty and important people. The first clue that something different is going on, though, is that this important person comes in riding on a donkey. The Roman leaders clearly sensed something has happened because they are on their mighty horses overlooking this procession. Now, between the mighty horses and a colt, it might make Jesus look weak in comparison. But we will come to find that, the one who appeared weak, has the power of all his own. So while many are cheering, there are many different perspectives and responses. These different groups include the disciples, those in the crowd, those leaders witnessing the event from the temple, and those leaders of the Roman empire.

So here we are, at a juncture of joy and excitement and expectation. And we know that the week to come is going to end in a most unexpected and painful way. But they don't. For example, we are told that among the disciples, one would betray Jesus and another would deny Him, not once, but three times. There are different reactions from people in the crowd, as well. The Roman rulers looked down upon the scene. Perhaps a contemporary image would be of the disputed president Maduro of Venezuela with his army looking down on the protesters in the crowds below. Some people had imagined a mighty warrior who would lead them to victory over the oppressive Roman Empire. And so, for them, the arrival of Jesus is a long-awaited Messiah arriving, and it is a time for hope. The temple leaders are threatened by his power, and they want him gone. And they watch like spies, part of an unfolding murder mystery. And others saw him as one who could do amazing and magical things, healing, and turning water into wine multiplying loaves and fishes. A man who could make their difficult lives so much easier. And finally, there are those who come to see him as a different kind of savior, one who connected heaven to earth. And they realized he was the one who came to teach them about life and love in powerful new ways.

So for some, this story is the beginning of the end for a hoped-for and anticipated Messiah. His death was not supposed to happen. For others, it is the end of his beginning. Jesus is the Messiah but not in the way they had first imagined. So on this Palm Sunday, we are invited to reflect on the different ways the story will impact those there and how we might respond to it. And I read a book recently that touched on many ways that people responded to a seemingly parallel situation., and the book is called *The Improbable Journey of Harold Fry*. A book we're going to discuss in a book group later in April, so don't worry, Maggie Albers, I won't give it away, okay? The book is about Harold, a man, who in the early years of his retirement begins to fade away. He stays home most of the time. His world becomes smaller and smaller and painfully predictable. He's essentially becoming less and less each day. But one day, he receives a letter from someone in his distant past. The person is in hospice and it's a good-bye letter thanking him for all his support in the past. But the letter starts an unexpected chain of events. For after writing a letter to respond and going out to mail it he finds himself walking from mailbox to mailbox to mailbox, further and further from home. After a mile or two, he stops to get something to drink and has a conversation with someone at a gas station that causes him to consider doing something different. He decides rather than mail the letter he would go in person to visit his old friend and it starts him on a journey of over 600 miles to the hospice where the letter writer is living. His actions surprised him and those who know him. At first, he's exhilarated. He's outside, he gets to see the world anew. He meets people along the way. He listens to their stories and learns from them, things that they may have hesitated to share with those they are even closest to. But with Harold, they find him to be a listening soul. Compassionate and understanding. A doctor with a broken heart finds solace and he helps her face the future in new ways. She tends his blistering feet and gives him a compass for his journey. He talks with another person who inspires him because he trusted him, and he leaves each encounter with sort of trails of peace coming from behind him. But then things shift. He becomes a news story and you know what that means in the world today. The

media is out in full force. One unusual move and they are with him every step of the way. And so it goes for Harold.

Crowds gather in towns and villages to cheer him when he arrives, and his wife and neighbors watch the events on television, amazed by the transformation that's going on with Gerald. Now, people seek him out because they know who he is. Some like the opportunity for notoriety for themselves. Others find him a listening ear that others had encountered earlier on. Others are curious, and some want to be connected with him because of his fame and want to make a name for themselves. So some of them decide to join him on the journey. And soon, it's not only Gerald who's making the news. Those with him do as well and things begin to shift. Some want to take charge of the journey, and Gerald feels overwhelmed, yet he is concerned for those with him that are struggling. And I found myself thinking of him like Henri Nouwen, the theologian who talks about the wounded healer, someone who listens and responds in ways that are healing, knowing that they themselves need to be healed. So Gerald helps them not with sage words of advice flowing off his tongue but by simply listening with a compassionate heart. And he also finds that as he calls his wife and writes letters to his neighbors, that those who know him and love him are developing a new relationship with him. But finally, all the attention is too much, and he peels off and sets out on another path by himself. Those who have been with him have different reactions. Some are angry. Some judge him. Some tell untrue things about him. And others, in only the way we Americans can, psychoanalyze his behavior.

We learn, in the closing chapters, how the story ends, but it's not the way we might have expected. While some have disparaged him, those who have known him and followed him, have been deeply touched by him. They see the change. They trust in his story, and they find themselves changed as well. It is a time of new beginnings. So I found myself thinking about Gerald and how his story and his journey reflected so many things about the journey to Jerusalem. The disciples are there. The crowds cheer as Jesus comes by. A journey is going on, but the outcome is not really known. Throughout his ministry, Jesus has listened and offered compassion and invited people into a new way of life. As things continue, some do not or cannot understand, some feel betrayed, some feel threatened, and some turn away when everything falls apart. Some are disappointed, not for him but for themselves and what they had expected to get out of it. For them, it is the beginning of the end, but for others, it's the end of the beginning. The future is filled with new possibilities. Some may turn away, but that's not the end of the story, for we know, in the days to come, the disciples return and are renewed in their hope beyond their wildest imaginings. Others stand by him at the cross. Others hear him on the road to Emmaus and are transformed by hope. For all of them, it is the beginning of something new, a new way of life and living, and it so touches their lives that they share it with others. For them, this final journey is really a beginning.

So we, on this side of the cross, are invited to remember the meaning of the closing days of Jesus' life here on earth. We will be reminded in the days to come of a most unexpected outcome, but first, we must make our way to Jerusalem. Let's make the journey together. Amen